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## Engaging Students with Objects: Preliminary Experiments in Reviving a Dormant Fashion Research Collection

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## Engaging Students with Objects: Preliminary Experiments in Reviving a Dormant Fashion Research Collection

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Study collections of dress offer students, faculty and visiting researchers the opportunity to engage with actual garments and accessories, offering physical specimens for design inspiration and material culture studies. Students can feel the weight of the fabric in hand, examine the details of cut, construction and embellishment, consider the relationship of the garment to the body or search for evidence of how the garment was worn, used or altered over time.

The Fashion Research Collection is a repository of several thousand items acquired by donation since 1981. Initially created as a teaching resource for the School, the Collection was stored behind an unmarked door in the library, and for the past several years, lay dormant. In the past year, the Collection Co-ordinator has undertaken the project to edit and re-establish this Collection as an accessible resource tool within the university. In February 2012, when the project commenced, the storage facility was in a state of disarray, stuffed with racks and boxes of clothing with no discernable method of organization. The database was degraded and the Collection was largely unknown by the student body. Since that time, the Collection has been substantially edited with a focus on identifying and retaining items that can be used to serve as examples of construction, design inspiration or material culture research and/or reflect the School's objectives of heritage, innovation, and diversity. This paper reflects on the preliminary experiments to encourage faculty and students to engage with objects from the Collection.

Engagement with objects is a long established pedagogy that can serve to mediate substantive meaning and context (Simpson and Hammond 2012). Object-based learning used to be an integral part of teaching strategy in the 19<sup>th</sup> and early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> centuries (Chatterjee 2010). In this case study, objects such as textile samples, books of laces, patterns, drawings, historic dolls in period costume, fashion magazines and garments had been actively used in the classroom from 1948 when the Department was initially set up. The Collection was formally established as a separate entity in 1981, but by the time this project was initiated in 2012, objects from the Collection were rarely used within the classroom setting.

In the face of budgetary pressures, the long-term viability of a university collection demands that the collection be actively used. Simpson and Hammond assert that in order to maintain material collections, it is "essential to extract the maximum amount of value from them in supporting the business of the university". With a degraded database, layers of dust, and years of non-use, few people knew what was in the Collection. The co-authors of this paper applied for and received

an internal grant in order to photograph one hundred key artifacts as a first step in opening up access to the Collection.

Artifacts are effective teaching tools, providing a tangible connection to the past. Documenting, categorizing, and photographing the key artifacts in the Collection and uploading these images to an online portal will allow both faculty and students to know what is in the Collection. This digitization project is intended to place the user in the center of the process and make the artifacts available when needed. Users will be able to browse the available images and search records such as title, designer, label, country of origin, general description, date of origin, condition and curatorial notes. Faculty can incorporate real artifacts into their teaching platform, and it is hoped that students will be inspired to seek out the real objects to extend their learning.

In a parallel process, preliminary experiments to integrate objects into the classroom were conducted on a limited basis in order to assess pedagogic strategies to support object-based learning. At the undergraduate level, individual students taking costume history and Fashion Theory were supported on request, and racks of garments were created for faculty to use in teaching construction methods and costume history. At the graduate level, artifacts were selected for in-class exercises in object-based analysis, and upon request, garments were selected to support individual research.

Anecdotal evidence from these preliminary experiments suggests that many students, and even some faculty, demonstrate initial reluctance to engage with actual objects. Even when encounters were facilitated, many students lacked the close observational skills and the patience required to make sense of an unfamiliar object. In an aesthetic discipline where nothing is new in the endless recycling of elements from the past, knowledge and respect for history and real objects is critical. This paper will elaborate on strategies used to overcome this deficit.

Chatterjee, Helen J. 2010. "Object-based learning in higher education: The pedagogical power of museums," *University Museums and Collections Journal* 3: 179-191.

Simpson, Andrew and Gina Hammond. 2012. "University collections and object-based pedagogies," *University Museums and Collections Journal* 3: 75-81.